The Human Machine

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The Human Machine

by ivnwrites

Summary

In a future where most people are fitted with noninvasive brain implants tailored to their job, Hannibal quickly grew frustrated with the almost stagnated pace of development and decided to start his own experiments. Building on hardware already in an individual's head was easy in theory, but in practice it was proving more complicated than he thought.

Six years ago, Will became the latest victim of the Ripper, waking up in the hospital with his head cut open again and had to relearn how to control his own brain. He was allowed to join the investigation four years later on the condition that he meet with a psychiatrist. It had helped him deal with the psychological trauma from his abduction, but it wasn't helping the glitches and malfunctions that were starting to become worryingly frequent.

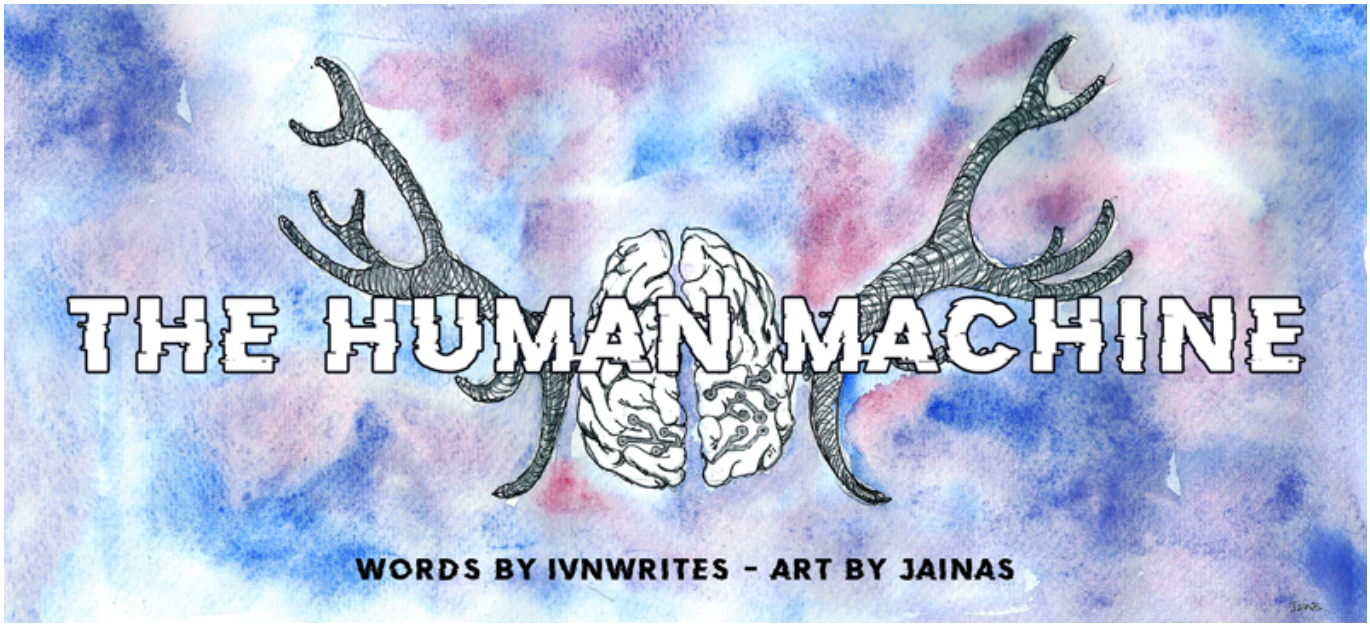
Notes

The fantastic art in this fic was drawn by Jainas, and she has been phenomenal and patient with me. Click on her name to go to her tumblr, her art is amazing.

I have to say a gigantic thank you to Wings, Sam, and Chris for beta reading this for me and for helping me figure out the plot.

A few context notes:
Geography is changed a bit so Will, Hannibal, and the FBI are all located in the same city. As for technological development, imagine something about 20 years behind the world seen in Ghost in the Shell Stand Alone Complex but without the robots.

Chapter 1



The machine resting on Hannibal's knees had taken nearly three thousand dollars in cash dealings under an assumed identity to assemble. A full month of nights had followed to ensure that it would successfully function, bent over his desk till a low ache spread across the small of his back. But in the end it had been worth it, as the improvised rugged laptop allowed him to keep track of his creations without the signal being easily tracked back to its source. He'd built the laptop after his first experiment with brain implants had gone awry.His first subject had vanished from society, only to be found at the bottom of a ravine in an apparent suicide.

At the moment, he sat in the midst of a rooftop garden, the busy traffic and lights of the city far below him echoing up the steep sides of the buildings as he re-established the connection to the implants in Will Graham's brain. After the first year he'd expected the link to be dead, the signal echoing out into the dark without reaching a receiver, as it had with the others.

Some had gone insane crazy, unable to process the additional feedback in their brains, taking their own lives after a matter of days or months. Others had rejected the implants, their bodies trying to break down the hardware, turning back on the brain itself when that failed. Still others had closed their eyes when Hannibal sedated them and never opened them again, still physically alive on the table but completely brain dead. He'd given them two days to wake up before snapping their necks and placing them where they would easily be found the next morning, the words 'I apologize' burned into the surface above their heads. It was a more dignified end than leaving them in a random location to wither away.

The lack of success aggravated him, but Will had somehow managed to survive longer than any of the others. There had been, of course, a myriad of psychological issues after the attack, the usual trauma and PTSD, but eventually he had managed to adapt to the implants, building their feedback into his own thought processes, dealing with the occasional glitches, nightmares, and mental agony better than any other subject before him had.

Hannibal watched as the clock at the corner of his screen flickered past midnight and looked up at the dark sky, his fingertips hovering over the keys as he considered his words. He'd periodically contacted Will throughout the years, sending direct messages to him in the middle of the night, knowing they would be relayed no matter what state of consciousness he was in.

[Six years, Will. Well done.]

Miles away, Will's eyes snapped open, his - for once peaceful - sleep completely shattered as he lurched violently awake. The words didn't show up in the text his implants usually displayed when he received outside messages, plain font that adapted to be readable no matter what was behind the words. It was less like reading text, and much more akin to having someone suddenly try to start a conversation after sneaking up behind him. Half the time he could feel the connection being made with the same sensation of his ears popping in an airplane. The other half, he was either asleep or distracted, and the words came as an unwelcome surprise.

"As you can tell, I'm hardly as thrilled by the anniversary as you are."

The first few times it had happened, Will hadn't know whether it was real, or just some figment of his imagination inventing a personality for his attacker. He still hadn't decided if it was better or worse to know that they were in fact coming from a real outside source. On the one hand, it meant he wasn't as crazy as he feared, and on the other, it had only confused him further. What sort of person would mutilate another's brain and then decide that that was grounds to become pen-pals? Why would they want to stay in contact with their victims? And more to the point; why had Will been targeted?

He rolled out of bed with a heavy sigh, padding over to the window to rest his forehead against the cool glass. He looked out over the field surrounding his home as he settled onto the wide window sill, knees held to his chest. The commute to work required him to live closer to the city than he would have liked, but he'd managed to find a house far enough away that the skyscrapers blurred into sparkling blocks on the horizon. He could still make them out, but the noise and light couldn't reach him, and the crowded, seething streets felt like they were a world away. "Where are you?" He asked out loud, knowing that he would be heard.

[I assume you already know I won't answer that question.]

Will scoffed. "No, of course not." If their previous conversations were anything to go on, his attacker was practically a contortionist when it came to twisting his way out of Will's questions. The cryptic hints peppered throughout their frequent conversations had resulted in one of the investigators nicknaming Will's attacker 'The Ripper' after the original's habit of taunting Whitechapel police. So far, the only concrete facts Will had been able to pry loose over the years were that the Ripper was a man, he lived in the city, and he had some sort of connection into the FBI, regularly commenting on the cases Will was given. "You said yourself though, it's been six years. That's longer than any of your other victims. Surviving that long surely that entitles me to one honest, straightforward answer."

[By whose standards?]

"Mine. It is my brain, after all."

Ridiculous as it was, Hannibal couldn't fault his reasoning. [Very well then.] He acquiesced. [I will not reveal any information that could identify me, but otherwise I will answer one question sincerely.]

“How do you chose your victims? There’s no real pattern with regard to age or sex or occupation, and you and I have already discussed how all the previous theories were wrong, so I want to know why you chose us.”

Most of the investigators who had been put on the case early on had assumed that Hannibal looked down on his victims, the the implants were him trying to improve them because he found them somehow sub par. It couldn’t have been further from the truth. He’d read through most of the available medical literature on previous experiments that attempted to use cybernetic implants to improve the mental capacity of patients with disabilities. The goal had been to use the computers to fill in the gaps where the individual’s brain alone failed, replacing human cognition with processing power. Every one had resulted in complete and utter failure with little concrete reason as to why even when there appeared to be no clear medical cause. The eventual conclusion was that a brain couldn’t be repaired using external means, so Hannibal had turned to a different question, asking whether or not it would be possible to augment a natural ability that a person already possessed.

[To use your case as an example; you had previously displayed a natural aptitude for visualizing the events of a crime scene and using the software available to aid in your analysis. Because of this, I thought you would be best equipped to handle being given similar input directly. In the end, I was right.]

“And it’s the same for everyone?”

[Yes. If you look at each one, you’ll find a natural ability that I attempted to augment with varying degrees of success.]

“Oh so that’s what you call a 99% death rate.”

[What would you call your close rate at the FBI?]

“I never asked for this.” Will shot back. Part of the annoyance stemmed from the fact that the man was right. Will had been able to solve cases more quickly since he was attacked, but it hadn’t come without consequences. On top of the expected PTSD and arduous recovery, he was consistently woken by vivid nightmares more often than not as his brain tried to process what it had seen during the day. He’d taken a nasty fall over a year ago, and the seizures and malfunctions had started after that. Something was broken, but every scan known to modern medicine had led to dead ends.

He used the back of his hand to stifle a yawn, brows knitting in annoyance when another message showed up. [I should let you sleep.] Though he hated to admit it, the Ripper was right, and Will sent a final glare out the window before turning back to his bed. He was able to drift back to sleep quickly, but it was far from restful, and he jolted awake in the morning to find himself tangled in the sheets and close to falling off the mattress entirely.

Chapter 2

Will strode into work the next day juggling a travel mug as he shrugged off his jacket. He'd paid almost no attention to the drive from his house, instead mulling over his conversation with the Ripper. It was still whirring around his mind when he walked into the main floor of the BAU, and he didn't notice the person standing outside his office till he was right in front of them.

"Hannibal." Will wrapped an arm around the psychiatrist's waist, grinning when a hand curled at the side of his neck to pull him into a kiss. Will let himself be held for a moment, enjoying the feel of Hannibal's skin against his own. It was a much more pleasant way to procrastinate than anything else he could have planned.

When he'd asked to be put on the Ripper case, it had come with conditions, one of which required he meet with a psychiatrist to actually start working through the psychological scars left by his attack. It was technically better than his previous solution of attending therapy just long enough to get cleared for work then refusing to discuss the matter further. During his first few sessions with Hannibal, their conversation had been stilted at best, belligerent at worst.

It had taken over a month, but eventually Will realized that Hannibal wasn't poking and prodding at him the way the others had. He would ask questions but seemed content when their only response was open air, waiting for Will to answer rather than trying to force him into it. In the end, it worked. Will had slowly begun to trust him, at times volunteering information before Hannibal had asked, confiding in him when he couldn't get a case out of his head.

Over time, the relationship had developed far beyond what either had originally intended till they somehow ended in their current position.

"It's been a long week without you." Will pressed his forehead to Hannibal's before pulling away to retrieve his office keys, resigned to the day's work. "I had an interesting conversation last night with our killer." He led Hannibal into the office and booted up his desk before continuing, moving the files he'd left open into a more manageable arrangement.

"He said something about each victim having some 'natural ability' that he was trying to improve and I was looking through the previous cases, trying to figure out what each one was." Will gestured to the papers spread across his desk, the touchscreen below it also filled with various profiles and medical records. "Do you remember the Navy pilot, Lynette Edwards? She was abducted about a year before me when she was stationed nearby?"

"Of course." Hannibal never forgot any of the people he augmented, retaining details even beyond what was necessary to find and keep track of them. "Though if I remember correctly, her death wasn't related to the implants."

"It wasn't, she was landing on an aircraft carrier when the arresting cable snapped." He flicked his fingers over the screen to enlarge the accident report. "She managed to eject, but the angle was all wrong and she died the next day from her injuries." Will stared down at the photo attached to her file. The two of them had developed a strange camaraderie during the investigation into her attack, even trading messages after her interviews were finished and she'd been able to return to her post. She'd also been one of the other two people who had reported actually talking to the Ripper, in the same cryptic midnight conversations that Will had recounted. For that short time, Will had enjoyed

having someone to commiserate with. He'd asked to work on the Ripper case shortly after her death, spurred on by some conviction he couldn't quite place.

Hannibal took a step closer when Will fell silent, twining his fingers around Will's free hand, their shoulders pressing together. Will took his gesture of false solidarity at face value and squeezed Hannibal's hand. "What did you discover in her files?"

"There was an incident report a while before her abduction that caught my attention." Will appeared to snap out of his reverie, opening a new file on the screen. "There was some sort of problem during a night patrol and her plane went into a tailspin. It's hard enough to recover over land in full daylight, at night over water, it's functionally impossible, there are no visual markers." He clicked over to a video taken afterward by the Navy's investigators, and Lynette's face appeared on the screen, gazing evenly into the camera as she spoke.

'Pilots always learn that when your instruments fail, you trust your instincts. I guess I was able to reverse that. I just needed to stop trying to see what I was doing, and trust my instruments. Thank god they weren't malfunctioning!' She laughed with a raised eyebrow. 'When I'm flying, all the readouts just…' She pursed her lips as she struggled to find the right words. 'It feels like it's the same as everything I see and hear. It's like they become an extension of my own senses, and I know how to process the input the same way I would anything else.'

Will flicked the recording closed, letting go of Hannibal's hand to settle behind the desk. "I think this is the reason why the Ripper targeted her. If someone is able to internalize data they receive, making the sensors feed directly into their brain seems almost like a natural extension of that ability." He paused in his explanation as Hannibal carried a second chair over to sit beside him, and Will used the time to shuffle file folders into some semblance of order on his desk, not looking forward to sorting them out to be returned. "I looked at the analysis of her implants, and as far as we could tell, they contained a gyroscope, an altimeter, and a gps, along with the computational unit. If you have the data from those instruments, you can calculate approximate location, airspeed, and orientation, which is enough to navigate by assuming they're correct."

"With mine, I have to chose to turn them on, I have to start the analysis. Lynette was just given a constant passive stream of data that she could use whenever she needed." A rueful smile pulled at the corner of Will's lips. "I don't want to say she had it any easier, but I am somewhat bitter about the fact that she didn't have to learn how to use the damn things."

Unbeknownst to Will, Hannibal had been watching him closely from the instant he began to discuss the case, paying little to no attention to the various files the investigator had used to illustrate his points. He already knew everything the investigation had uncovered, carefully planning and committing his crimes to memory, but it was still fascinating to watch Will pour through the evidence and begin to puzzle out Hannibal's thought patterns.

"I think I'm finally starting to figure out how this one thinks. Our original idea was that he thought his victims were inadequate, but from the conversation we had last night, I think I'm right that's it's the opposite." He looked up from the screen and turned to Hannibal as he sat back in his chair. "I think the Ripper respects his victims, maybe even admires them." He reached up to touch the base of his skull, running his fingertips over the scar from his abduction. The habit had developed after he was released from the hospital, and hadn't stopped when his hair finally grew out.

"You have your conversations with the Ripper to go on, but from the way you've described them, I sincerely doubt he told you this directly."

Will chuckled. “I actually got a straight answer out of him last night.”

“How did you manage that?”

“It’s been six years since the first night I went missing, and presumably that’s when he put the implants in. I figure at this point, I’m the only victim still alive, and I’ve been engaging in these stupid conversations the entire time, so he owes me.so I asked why I was the one attacked.” Hannibal laid a hand on his arm and Will closed his eyes to accept the gentle kiss and murmured condolence that were pressed against his temple. He was still somewhat shaken by the reminder, having made every effort to forget the date. “It makes sense, though. He leaves his victims close to hospitals so that we’ll be seen immediately, and the messages are him checking our progress.” He blinked at Hannibal, eyes not quite focused. “He wants us to live, and figure out how to use his ‘gifts.’”.

Chapter 3

The FBI only asked Will to visit crime scenes when there was something overtly strange, or if it fit into the pattern for a known serial killer. He'd left the lecture hall planning to meet Hannibal outside the building, but instead had been flagged down and handed a piece of paper with an address before being told that he was expected. He read over the summary e-mailed to him with a frown as he walked out into the late fall sunshine, pausing when he reached the steps. "Hannibal." The man in question looked up from where he'd been waiting at the base of the stairs, smiling when he saw Will. "I'm sorry, I have to cancel."

Hannibal reached out to lay a hand on Will's waist as he reached the bottom step. "I'm still pleased to see you."

Will let out an amused huff. He reached up to cup the line of Hannibal's jaw, and pressed a gentle kiss to the corner of his mouth, taking the final step down so their chests bumped together. "I'm happy to see you too." His hands slipped down to rest on Hannibal's shoulders, not quite ready to step away. "I've been asked to look at a scene a few miles away, and it'll probably take a few hours at the very least." He rolled his eyes with a sigh.

"Could I perhaps escort you then? It is fascinating to watch you work. "

"You don't have anything else today?"

"Paperwork and prescriptions, but I have no more appointments."

"It feels like every time someone says we're becoming a paperless society, there are ten more forms to fill out."

Hannibal grinned. "True enough, so may I accompany you?"

Will considered it for a moment before nodding. "Yeah, I'd like that."

The crime had taken place in one of the older buildings in the city that were classed as historical landmarks. They tended to attract younger tenants who were looking for a lower price tag, either roommate or couples who didn't require much space. From their social media accounts, it appeared that the victims fell into the latter category. By the time Will arrived, the scene was teeming with forensic analysts, but the couple hadn't been touched. The killer had positioned them sitting across from each other at the small dining room table, heads slumped onto their chests with dried rivulets of blood on either side of their necks. The table was empty save for a small vase with dying wildflowers in the center, and both of their chairs rested in pools of whatever blood hadn't soaked into their clothes.

A report from the man's credit card showed that the two had taken a cab home from a local bar around 9pm, and forensics put their deaths less than an hour later. The building's super had been asked to check on them when neither had shown up to work the next morning and found them in their current position. When the FBI showed up and hour later, they were cold and limp, rigor mortis long gone.

"I didn't know this one was anything unique."

Will turned from his examination of the scene and saw Jimmy Price walking toward him. He shrugged and took the tablet that was held out to him. "I just go where I'm told." He walked into the kitchen with a frown. Two pools of blood had spread across the linoleum where the victims had fallen, with long trails of droplets leading from them to the table. "What do we know so far about the killer?"

"There are no drag marks, and given the spread of the blood droplets, they were carried to the dining room from in here." Price explained, pointing to various numbered markers as he did. "The female victim's 5′5 and male's 6′1 and they're both in relatively good shape, so we're not looking for a bodybuilder, but with the upper body strength needed, the killer's probably male."

"The entry and exit wounds are too clean for a gun." He leant forward to look at the marks on the victim's necks. Whoever the killer was, they were a good shot. The investigators wouldn't know for sure until they conducted an autopsy, but it appeared both victims had been shot in either the jugular or carotid, meaning they would have bled out in a matter of minutes. "What was the murder weapon?"

"You're gonna love this; we're pretty sure it was a crossbow."

Will pulled his head back in disbelief. "Who kills people with a crossbow?"

"It's quieter than a gun and bolts can be removed from a body at the scene unlike a bullet, you just need to be in the right range." Jimmy pointed across the living room. "There were a few marks on the window sill, and cameras in the lobby don't show anyone who can't be ID'ed as staff or a resident. Right now our best guess is that the killer waited on the fire escape to take them out and left the same way."

"How much weight is the fire escape rated for?" Will scrolled through the tablet trying to find any further mention of it.

"No idea." Jimmy answered. "It was reinforced 3 years so it would stay on the building, but at this point it just serves as decoration. We'll get someone out to test it tomorrow."

"Anything else I should know?" He'd gone through all of the data packets sent to him on the way over, securing his connection to the FBI's servers as he did. The connection ensured that the information he needed would be pulled up as he looked through the scene.

"Nothing new."

Will nodded. "Alright, I'll see what I find." He closed his eyes as people began to move away from the scene. It gave him enough space to walk around without running into anyone, but at times it felt disconcerting, being left alone with the remnants of a murder.

It only took a minute for him to flick through menus to find the right program and plug in the files he needed before opening his eyes.

The couple showed up as labeled wire frame approximations of themselves, standing close together in the kitchen as if they were preparing the long cold meal that had been left on the stove. After a second, a shot came from the crack in the window and the man crumpled as it intersected his neck. The woman tried to come to his aid but quickly met the same fate. She collapsed against him and they tumbled into place over the blood in the kitchen, settling into the poses he'd seen in the initial photos.

Will turned to look at the window and saw a blocky form crouched outside of it. The timestamp over the simulation indicated a skip for the victims to bleed out before the figure pushed the window all the way open and clambered through. It walked quickly through the apartment and flicked off the stove as it entered the kitchen.

Less of the woman's blood had been found in the kitchen, so she was the first one hauled up from the floor and carried to her current seat at the table. The man got the same treatment but Will ran through the last minutes of the simulation again. He couldn't find a way for the killer to carry them that didn't end with him at least somewhat covered in blood, and Will made a note of it before trying to close down the simulation.

Will blinked rapidly when his vision didn't return, his eyes flicking back and forth for a minute before he shut them tightly. "It's not shutting off." Trying to see the world around him during a glitch was a bit like looking at a double exposure, with one layer made up of the real world, the other the simulation of the crime he'd just run. Everything around him would appear to be replicated just a step away from where it really was, but he had no way to tell the difference even after encountering the same problem with worrying frequency over the past two years.

He sank to the ground with a nauseous shiver. The perspective behind his eyelids didn't change in time with his movements, instead remaining fixed at his eye level when it had restarted. He could deal with the motion sickness, it was the loss of control that scared him; simply waiting for his normal vision to return without having a choice in the matter was agonizing at the best of times. Sitting on an unfamiliar floor, surrounded by bodies while he couldn't stop the images of their deaths from replaying in his head had been downright terrifying when it had first occurred. Will was less than pleased by the fact that he'd gotten used to it.

Fingertips brushed against his jacket before a hand came to rest on Will's shoulder, and he was able to recognize Hannibal's cologne as the other man knelt beside him. "I just need to wait." He explained, watching the murder play out for the second time. "The simulation runs again, and then it shuts down."

Hannibal watched him intently. He'd set up an alert on his computer that would ping him every time the implants malfunctioned, but biometric readings didn't offer insight into a person's mental state, so he'd only been able to gauge Will's reactions after their sessions began and he was could ask directly. This close though, he could see the nervous sweat beading at Will's hairline, the way his eyes still moved uselessly behind his closed lids. He slid his hand over under the guise of shifting his weight and could feel Will's racing pulse beneath a fingertip

Minutes passed before Will grimaced and gave his head a small shake. He opened his eyes gingerly, blinking to orient himself again. He turned to look at Hannibal and the other man raised a questioning eyebrow. "I'm alright, it's just disorienting."

“Though this happened at the last two scenes you were asked to investigate as well if I’m not mistaken.”

“Yeah.”

Hannibal cocked his head. “Has it ever happened three times in a row before?” It hadn’t, though during their sessions Hannibal had learnt that Will had a habit of telling half truths or simply lying to downplay his condition.

“Never.” Will admitted. He fixed Hannibal with a tired expression. “Is this when you tell me I need to go get my brain scanned again?”

“How well you know me.” Hannibal smiled and pulled Will to his feet, keeping a hand wrapped around his upper arm for support.

The forensics team crept back into the room around them, returning to their various tasks and conversations. Soon enough, the scene was once again filled with mostly relevant chatter, eliminating the gloom that had fallen over it when Will was alone. It took a few more minutes for him to upload the simulation data before he made his way to the door where Jimmy was ending a phone call.

“How are you feeling?” He glanced between the scene and Will’s face.

“I’ll be ok.”

“Jack says you should go home.”

“I’m fine.”

“He said that since you experienced a glitch you need to go home and give your brain a rest. And if you don’t cooperate, I’m supposed to get Dr. Lecter to drag you away from the scene.”

Will pointedly ignored the sound of Hannibal chuckling beside him. “Did he really say that last part?”

“Not in so many words, but the meaning was there.”

With a pinched expression on his face, Will relented. He went through the process of signing all the random paperwork needed before leaving the building. He slid into Hannibal’s car and folded his arms across his chest, still somewhat disgruntled.

As they pulled onto the highway, Hannibal glanced over at Will before returning his eyes to the road. “Would you like me to take you back to the academy?”

The car was silent for a while as Will considered, staring out the window at the skyline. He was never able to sleep well after a glitch, either tossing and turning the whole night or waking up with nightmares. He felt somewhat guilty at the possibility of subjecting Hannibal to it, but the man had soothed his nightmares before, at times even wholy preventing them. Eventually, he scrubbed a hand over his face and turned to Hannibal. “Would it be alright if I stayed with you tonight?”

“Of course.” He reached out and rested a hand on Will’s elbow. “You’re always more than welcome.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Warning: nightmare gore

Dinner was a fairly quiet affair, the two of them sitting in companionable silence at the table as they watched rain fall outside the large windows. Afterward, Will helped him clean the dishes and thanked Hannibal before making his way upstairs. He took a longer shower than normal. Crime scenes always left him feeling like there was an invisible residue covering his skin. It wasn't heavy or painful, it was just there for days afterward and nothing he did could make the sensation fade faster.

He scrubbed himself dry and dressed quickly, rubbing his arms against the chill that had settled around him. Sleep came quickly after he crawled into the large bed and he only dimly felt it when Hannibal settled beside him before slipping back into his dreams.

Will opened his eyes the next morning to find himself alone on the bed with no evidence that Hannibal was ever there beside him. A quick search of the room left no clues as to where he could have gone, all the doors were still closed, there were no notes left behind or belongings placed askew, and the bedside table was empty rather than holding the book Hannibal had been reading when Will closed his eyes. He slid his feet to the floor and recoiled when his toes met the freezing wood, placing them down slowly the next time he tried. He reached out and grabbed the red sweater folded by his pillow and shrugged it on before forcing himself out of the bed with a shiver.

The rest of the house was similarly empty as Will made his way down the stairs, calling out only to hear his voice echo without a response. It looked more like a property for show than a real home. All the furniture and appliances were there, but they had the air of never actually being touched by human hands.

When he finally reached the kitchen he stopped. A woman stood across from him, gazing out a large bay window that had been knocked out of the far wall. She'd leant forward to balance with a hand on the glass, craning her neck like she was trying to see something just out of view around the corner of the house.

"Lynette?"

She spun away from the window, resting a hand on her hip when she saw him. "Graham cracker, it's been a while." She crossed the foyer in a few easy strides and clapped a hand on his shoulder

with a grin. “Glad to see you’re not dead yet.”

He caught her arms to keep her from walking away, surprised when his hands didn’t simply pass through her. Will never believed in ghosts or spirits of any kind, but there was no other way to explain her sudden presence after he’d attended her funeral. “How are you are here? I thought you died three years ago.”

“Not important.” She shook him off and waved the question away before brushing past him with a grin. When he looked closer, he could see cracked fragments of pyrex and fiberglass stuck at odd angles into the side of her face. Half of her flight suit were ripped and bloody, hanging in shreds off her right arm and leg with the insignia dangling from bits of glue and thread. They disappeared when he wasn’t looking for them, but now that he had seen them, he couldn’t help but notice the lacerations and gashes out of the corner of his eye. The injuries matched the post-mortem reports he’d read after the accident, but she kept walking as if the caved in ribs and shattered leg were nothing. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to show you.” She turned and beckoned from the open door when he hesitated. “Come on.”

He hurried after her and out onto the barren street, pulling his coat tight against the wind as it raked over the facades of the empty houses. He lost track of time as they kept walking, eventually finding himself close to the center of the city, staring up at the skyscrapers as snow tumbled down their sides. She led him to one near the center and pulled him into a service elevator, stopping it a few floors below the top of the building.

The doors opened to reveal a bare concrete room with the walls and floor covered by plastic tarp except for a drain near the center. As he stepped further into the room other objects began to appear; cabinets, trays, a large surgical lamp, and an operating table in the center with its restraints hanging open. “What is this place?”

“This is where you think the Ripper took you when you were attacked.” She made it sound like the most obvious answer, but it took Will a moment to understand what she meant.

“This isn’t actually it?”

“Nope.” She hopped up onto the operating table, shifting until she found a comfortable position with her ankles crossed and hands folded behind her head. “You never actually woke up before being dropped off at the hospital, but you have an image in your head of what the room should have looked like.” She watched as he explored the room, running his hands over the cabinets and machinery. “It’s pretty well equipped.”

Will nodded. “It would have to be. Most of the victims survived getting impromptu brain surgery, so the Ripper has to have surgical experience.”

“What about hardware experience though?”

“He wouldn’t have to have any more than a normal cyberneticist. All the implants are made up of standard mass produced components with the serial numbers removed.” As he spoke, Will began to rifle through the various tool sets and drawers placed near the table. “He’s not making them from scratch, he’s cobbling them together from pre-made parts. The ripper is a handyman, not a machinist.” When there was no reply, he looked up to see that the table was empty and he was alone in the room. “Lynette?” The door they’d entered through had disappeared.

[Will, can you hear me?]

Pain lanced through his skull at the same time as his stomach twisted into a knot, and Will crumpled with a shout. The words were thunderous now, booming around the room so the walls shook. Will braced his hands on the floor, locking his elbows to keep from slamming face first into it when tremors rocked his frame.

[Will?]

Another shock of pain, and he heaved, a rush of black liquid pouring past his lips and onto the floor, as if he'd swallowed a gallon of crude oil. It left a coppery, blood like taste behind, and a burning sensation at the back of his throat. As it flowed away towards one of the drains under the table, he could see metallic glints emerging through the goo. Another heave, and Will heard something 'clink' against the concrete after scraping across the roof of his mouth.

It was a tiny piece of metal that looked vaguely electronic, and then another was revealed, and another, and another. Dread twisted his stomach into knots as he put a hand to the base of his skull and smeared his fingers through the liquid he could feel soaking into his hair. His skin came away covered in the same oily substance dripped continuously over his lips, forming a growing pool between his hands.

[I need you to wake up.]

A sharp crack followed the words rather than the normal pain, and Will felt liquid running down his cheeks before seeing dark red drops land on the floor between his hands. He reached back again, and his fingertips found a deep gouge stretching across his scalp. Below the skin, he could feel brittle jagged edges. He yanked his hand back in alarm when they met a gelatinous mass and his vision blacked out momentarily.

It was his brain.

"Will!"

He jolted awake with a gasp to find Hannibal looking down at him in concern, his features silhouetted by the light from the bedside lamp. He bent down to brace his arms on either side of Will's head. "You're safe. It's," Hannibal glanced at the clock "11:36, thursday night, you're in my home, you and I are the only ones here."

Even with the reassurances, Will's hands shook violently as he wrapped his arms around Hannibal's neck to hold him in place. It took a few more minutes for his breathing to even out again and for his grip to loosen. "I'm sorry."

"It's perfectly alright." Hannibal had made a habit of keeping a bath towel stashed beside the bed when Will stayed over, and he pulled Will upright before reaching over to retrieve it. He helped Will peel his soaked undershirt off and draped the towel around his shoulders using a corner to wipe away the sweat gathered on his forehead before it could drip into his eyes. He let his palms linger on Will's cheeks, trying to catch his attention. Though Will was facing Hannibal, he wasn't quite looking at him, eyes focused instead on some distant point somewhere over his shoulder. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Will let out a long sigh, swaying gently as he let Hannibal dry him. The rocking motion was hypnotic, and he was already sliding halfway back to sleep by the time Hannibal spoke. "Maybe in the morning." He mustered a weak smile and rested a hand on Hannibal's shoulder, using it to support himself so he could lean forward and press a kiss to his forehead. "Thank you though." He

curled onto his side with the towel still wrapped around him, closing his eyes when Hannibal's arms settled around his middle.

Chapter 5

The ceiling of his office swam into view before his eyes, the edges of the tiles not quite as defined as they should be. The blur was confusing on its own, add to that the fact that the last thing he'd seen before he blinked had been the open doorway, and he was left wondering when the ground had decided to shift. Will furrowed his brows, taking stock of himself before trying to move. His glasses were gone, and he could feel bruises beginning to along the spaces where his body touched the floor. A slight movement above him caught his attention, and his gaze flicked upward to see Hannibal looking down at him with concern. A second later, Will realized that his head and shoulders were resting on the Doctor's lap, a steady hand cradling the side of his neck to monitor his pulse. "Did I have a seizure?"

Hannibal nodded. "You stopped convulsing after two minutes."

"That's about the same as before. How long have I been out?"

"About half an hour"

"Oh." Will's expression remained in a peaceful daze for a moment more before twisting as he glanced at his desk and let out an irritated sigh. A brown accordion folder rested on the edge where he'd deposited it an hour before, the front halfway covered by bright green post-it to keep him from forgetting it.

"I assume you had a class?"

"Started at one pm."

"You're well past the 15 minute mark, so unless rules here are different, I believe most of your students will have already left."

"I was supposed to hand back an assignment."

"Ah."

"Now I have to e-mail them all their grades…later."

"Aside from the crushing guilt of letting your students down," Hannibal began with a slight grin, fingers continuing to brush idly through Will's hair in the same pattern they'd traced for nearly a year. He'd done it the first time after Will had collapsed leaving a crime scene, only to wake up startled and disoriented in a parking lot he had never seen before. The tiny repetitive movements had been enough to ground Will until he felt able to move again. From there it had become something of a ritual every time Hannibal has been present during Will's seizures. "How are you feeling?"

"Dizzy, completely exhausted, all my muscles are sore, and I'm going to have a lot of bruises tomorrow." He dragged his hands up off the floor to fold them over his stomach. "Nothing out of the ordinary."

"But this is the second one this week."

“I know.”

“Will.” Hannibal’s voice struck a chord between concerned and admonishing.

“I’ve had all the scans; nothing’s turned up.”

“Exploratory surgery is still a viable option, and at this point it may be the only one left.”

The topic had been brought up more times than Will could count, and each time he’d done his best to put the discussion off. The idea of having his head cut open again no matter who would be wielding the scalpel always settled itself into an uncomfortable lump in his stomach.

He wasn’t completely sure what made this time different, but his resolve finally cracked. “Would Alana be willing to do it?”

Alana Bloom had taken his case when Will was delivered to the hospital post-abduction. She’d walked him through the ensuing battery of exams and post operative issues, at the same time almost bodily pulling him out of the near complete breakdown he’d suffered after waking up. For the first few months, she’d tried over and over again to find a way to remove the unwanted implants without doing more damage, but in the end had been resigned to monitoring Will closely for anything that went wrong as they both waited for him to learn how they functioned.

“I’m almost certain she would be.”

Will’s face twisted rapidly through expressions before he settled on a grimace. “I’ll call her tomorrow morning, and work things out from there.” He reached up to place a hand on Hannibal’s knee. “Can you help me up?”

“Of course.”

It was slow going. Will’s muscles were still cramped and shaking too much to completely support his own weight, and he squeezed his eyes shut every few seconds to deal with the dizziness the movement caused. He ended up slumped against the couch he kept across from the desk, head supported by the arm as he gazed blankly at the far wall.

“I feel like I shouldn’t be so ambivalent about this.” Will sighed and rolled his head sideways to look at Hannibal. “I trust Alana, but after the last tine, I don’t really want anyone cutting into my brain.”

“It’s perfectly understandable given the circumstances, but I cannot stress enough how beneficial this surgery could be.” He cocked his head when Will smiled tiredly.

“You know, when you say it like that you really sound like my doctor.”

Hannibal shifted to kneel beside him, threading his fingers through Will’s hair. He leant forward with a grin so their noses brushed, watching as Will’s eyes fluttered closed. “Heaven forbid I actually do the job originally assigned to me.” He kissed Will gently, careful not to jostle his head, before pulling away with a regretful smile. “Unfortunately, on that topic; I have an appointment at 2:30, so I’m afraid I have to leave. Should I ask someone else to come help you?”

“No, I’ll be alright. I’m probably not going to get up for a few more minutes, but I’ll be ok.”

“And you’ll call me this evening with an update.”

Will rolled his eyes. “Yes.”

Chapter 6

It took a few weeks for Alana to make the right arrangements, and in the end it was nearly a month before Will could be admitted to the hospital. He was put through a battery of tests, being moved through what felt like half the scanners in the building before finally being taken to his room and left alone for the rest of the evening. The nurse who came in to check him before lights out delivered a note from Alana explaining that she'd been called for an emergency surgery.

The next morning, a knock came at the half open door, and Hannibal stepped inside, his normal suit jacket abandoned in favor of shirtsleeves and a vest. "Alana asked me to check on you."

"I'm still not dead, if that's what you're asking." Will looked up from his laptop. He'd spent the morning so far grading short essays and writing out notes for the adjunct who would be teaching the rest of the semester while he recovered. It became mind numbing after a while, but was also the distraction he'd needed after spending a restless night jerking awake whenever someone walked by the room. Still, Hannibal's arrival provided a welcome break, and Will clicked the computer shut, turning to watch as he checked over the various sensor readouts. "How am I doing?"

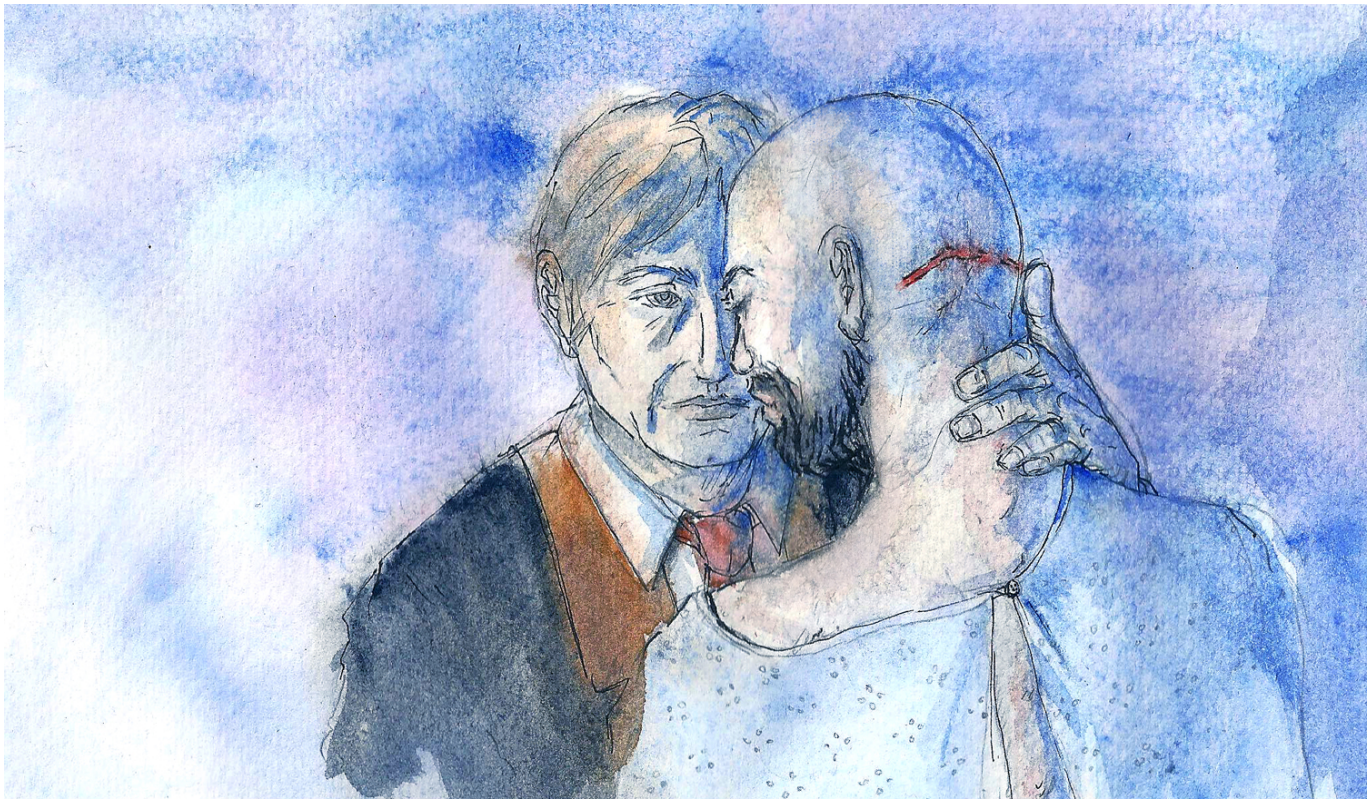
"Everything looks good, you should be able to go under tomorrow without a problem."

"Right."

The word came out half choked, and Hannibal turned from the monitor to see Will scrubbing a hand over his eyes, his face fallen into a frown. "Will?" Hannibal sat on the edge of the bed, thigh resting against Will's as he reached out to place a steady hand on his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Will's breath came out in a stuttering rattle as he reached up to run a hand over his scalp, fingertips coming to rest on the raised scar stretching across the back of it. Most of his initial implant surgeries were done endoscopically, so they'd only left behind tiny darkened lines and dots that had faded or been hidden in his hairline. His abduction had resulted in an angry red ridge of knotted flesh that had taken almost a month to heal shut, and two more after that to be completely hidden by his hair. Alana had promised that she would be able to cut along it for his surgery so he wouldn't have another scar, but Will still hated having his head shaved, not wanting to face the mixed looks of pity and curiosity he received when the scar was visible.

"I'm sorry. It just - everything seemed so surreal until last night." He admitted gesturing to the hospital equipment around him. "I'm about to have my head sliced open for the third time in my life, and it might be completely pointless." Living the past few years not knowing what would happen with the implants had been agonizing, but the uncertainty had also carried a strange sort of comfort. There may have been a chance that the implants would kill him the day after tomorrow, but that carried with it the chance that they wouldn't. For a long time, the possibility of one more day had been enough. He would come out of surgery with a concrete answer, but wasn't sure if he was ready to hear it. His voice cracked and skipped as he tried to explain, tears beginning to crawl across his cheeks. "I might be getting a death sentence tomorrow, and I'm fucking terrified."



Hannibal shifted forward, cradling the base of Will's skull in his palm as he wrapped the other man into an embrace. Will began to sob openly against Hannibal's neck, and for the first time, he felt something like regret. It hadn't been there when he'd watched Will go through recovery after Hannibal had initially augmented him, or when he'd watched the man struggle with the nightmares and hallucinations that followed. But sitting in the sterile room, holding Will as he sobbed felt different. Whether it was the personal connection, or something else, Hannibal didn't know, but he filed it away to analyze later in favour of rubbing his hand over Will's back in circles.

It took nearly half an hour for Will to calm enough to speak rather than simply mumbling half completed sentences against Hannibal's skin in between sobs. "Hannibal, I'm just … scared." Everything he'd been ignoring for the past few months came crashing through him, and he could only wait until the flood abated.

"Will, listen to me. Nothing has come up on any of your scans, and all the test results have been negative. At this point, we know this is a hardware problem, and machines can always be fixed, no matter who built them."

"But what if you can't just fix everything?"

"Then we'll find replacements." Hannibal pulled away and cupped Will's face between his palms. He used his thumbs to brush away any tears that hadn't fallen onto his jacket before leaning forward to kiss Will, barely brushing their lips together until Will pressed back. He lingered until some of the tension leeched from Will's frame, eventually pulling away just enough to speak. "We are not going to give up on you, I promise."

Will nodded, his breath still coming in fits and starts, and he rested his head against Hannibal's shoulder. The two of them sat together for a long time, and Will felt himself becoming almost drowsy as his breathing fell into sync with Hannibal's movements. The worry and anxiety were still there, but they had become distant, muffled, his mind finally quieting down somewhat.

[Hello Will.]

The message was even more unwelcome against the stark surroundings of the hospital. “By now you know that I’m not the sort of person who blames everything that goes wrong in his life on someone else, but this,” He used his free hand to gesture at the machinery around him, glaring up at the ceiling in lieu of having and actual partner in the conversation. “really is all your fault.”

[Point taken, may I alleviate some of your concerns about your surgery tomorrow?]

Will fell silent as he considered . The Ripper had never outright lied to him during their conversations, though the evasions, and half answers that never really gave him any information had been frustrating in their own right. Eventually he sighed. “Fine, what is it?”

[I used standard components for all of the implants, all of which should still be in mass production or have updated versions available. Dr. Bloom and Dr. Lecter should be able to recognize and replace all of them. You also possess a copy of the schematics I used to design the implants should there be any problems.]

“I wasn’t aware of this.”

[Did you never check the on board memory after wiping it?]

“No, I assumed it would be blank after I deleted all of the contents.”

[There’s one folder that you don’t have authority to delete. I assume you cleared the memory before you were admitted?]

“Yes.”

[There should still be a folder present labeled DesignDocuments. It contains detailed schematics for your implants, a list of the parts, and summaries of their functions.]

Will closed his eyes and found the file, scanning through document after document to see if it was true. “Why would you give this to me?”

[The documentation allows for future repairs or upgrades.]

“But why let that happen? Why not use some obscure part that would be obsolete after a few years?”

[If I did that, I would be limiting your time to the lifespan of a piece of hardware, and as you said ‘I want you all to live.’]

Chapter 7

Will lost track of how long he had been sitting in the operating room for hours before anything happened. He'd resorted to counting how many times the heart monitor beeped between needle sticks as his scalp was numbed by the time Alana walked in, Hannibal and another doctor following behind her.

"Sorry for the wait, I wanted to go over the scans one more time before we began. This is my colleague Dr. Aparna Singh. She's going to be keeping an eye on you today while we operate." They shook hands awkwardly, th large frame holding his head in place making the gesture difficult.

He made small talk with Singh as he waited for them to finish setting up, startling when he realized that they while they had begun to open his skull. The conversation helped, but it wasn't enough to completely block out the sounds behind him, and Will found himself periodically wincing as the morbid part of his mind wondered how painful it would be without the drugs.

After about an hour, Alana broke into their conversation and came forward so she was in Will's line of sight. "We're going to to try removing the hard drive now." She explained, her voice even and steady as if she had done this a thousand times. "Tell me immediately if anything happens."

Wil swallowed thickly and sighed. "Alright."

He let out a breath as she stepped out of sight, fighting against the tiny spike of panic that ran through him. They'd warned him before surgery that his brain had changed as a result of the implants, rewiring itself around the new intrusions, but no one had been able to tell him for sure what would happen when parts were removed.

He heard the sound of metal sliding against metal before his vision froze and flickered out.

"I can't see, I can't see!" The hard drive immediately slid back into place and Will blinked frantically until the world came back into view. His eyes darted around the room wildly, trying to see every tiny detail in the room just to prove that he still could. He drew in a handful of ragged breaths, nails digging into his legs through the thin blanket spread over his lap as he waited for the panic to recede.

He was left with the same drained, empty feeling of an adrenaline crash, trying to catch his breath as if he'd been underwater for hours rather than the seconds it had taken to restore his vision. "Will, Will can you hear me?" Hands slipped into his own, slowly uncurling their death grip. He followed the arms up to see Dr. Singh leaning forward to catch his gaze, a small grin pulling at her lips when she succeeded. "There you are. These questions will seem redundant, but I need you to answer me with yes or no, and repeat what I asked you. Can you hear me?"

"Yes I can hear you."

"Can you see me?"

"Yes I can see you."

"Can you smell and breathe normally?"

“Yes I can breathe normally.”

“Can you squeeze my hands?”

He did. “Yes I can, do I need to repeat that one?”

“Not for these, can you wiggle your toes for me?”

He heard a quiet pop as the joints shifted. “Yes I can.”

“Are you getting tired of this routine?”

Will chuckled. “A little bit, yeah.”

“We’re going to remove the hard drive again, and this time we need a solid hour to examine it. I am going to be talking to you the whole time to make sure nothing happens, but I need you to keep breathing and answer my questions no matter what.” She squeezed his hands gently before taking a step away to give him room, wearing a reassuring smile. “Can you do that for me?”

His first instinct was to nod before he remembered the rig holding his head in place. “Yeah. Just give me another minute to calm down.” The heart monitor’s frantic beeping offered him a marker for his racing heartbeat as he slowly worked to calm it, taking deep breaths of sterile air that caused his nostrils to tingle with the airborne disinfectant. He waited until the tightness in his chest subsided before letting out a long breath. “Alright.”

“Close your eyes, and keep them closed until we’re finished.” She waited until he did so before looking past Will’s shoulder and nodding to Alana. “You were teaching a class at Quantico this semester, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I want you to go through the syllabus for me, major assignments, tests, core topics, things like that.”

Will furrowed his brow. “Why?”

“It allows us to make sure nothing is going seriously wrong.” Singh explained. “I can’t ask you to look at images or words, so recalling your schedule serves a memory exercise, and shows us you’re still able to keep track of a sequence of events. Having you recite it and answer questions makes sure that you’re still able to speak and hear normally.”

As Will began to talk, Alana slid the hard drive out of its chassis, hovering in place as she waited for a reaction. When there was none, she stepped away and handed it over to Hannibal to begin picking apart. She listened idly to Will and Singh’s conversation, overseeing a resident she was teaching as they maintained the exposed portion of Will’s brain.

After about a half hour Hannibal leant back in his chair and held up a hand to get her attention. “Alana, could you take a look at this?” Hannibal waited for her to wrap her hands in a sterile towel before coming to look over his shoulder, her hands held carefully out of the way. He used tweezers to hold up a pair of wires in the top left corner, leaning out of the way so she could see. They had come loose at some point, though Hannibal was slightly encouraged by the fact that the adhesive he’s used had held. The the wires hadn’t slipped out of their brackets, instead the thin metal had

snapped in half and the remaining jagged teeth had been able to slowly scrape away the insulation till the bare wires were exposed.

They kept their voices too low for Will to hear as they discussed the circuitry, Alana regularly glancing over her shoulder to keep an eye on the monitors. “This wasn’t an environment where they would arc easily, so the seizures must have been happening when the exposed bits made actual contact.” She gestured for Hannibal to rotate his hands so she could see the entirety of the wires. “Are these connected in any way to the batteries?”

“No, and there are no contact points nearby for them.”

“I’d like to get a closer look.” She nudged his shoulder, and Hannibal slid his chair sideways so she could get close to the table, still holding his hands steady. “Given what we know, I’m pretty sure the seizures were caused by over stimulation rather than power surges. I compared the EEG results we got when I managed to catch one of his seizures in the hospital to the ones I saw just after the abduction, and it looked as if he was experiencing the same sort of stimulus as that first week.”

That did fit with what he’d seen. The module that had been damaged provided Will with the ability to create simulations of crime scenes using the information that was fed into it. Will always closed his eyes when he needed to use it, having confided in Hannibal the he had difficulty telling the simulation from reality when he left them open. Hannibal’s own recordings along with the EEG readouts from the investigator’s initial stay in the hospital seemed to indicate that it had been working overtime, glitching to cause the horrific nightmares and hallucinations as it calibrated. It appeared to be malfunctioning the same way during the seizures.

Hannibal turned to look up at Alana, setting his tools aside for the moment. “Can you access his medical records? I have some idea of what caused this, but I want to know your opinion.”

She nodded, and her eyes appeared to lose focus. Hannibal could see lines flickering across her iris as she scrolled through the data. “Alright. What am I looking for?”

“The seizures started about a year and a half ago.”

“The first record we have is a year and seven months ago.” She confirmed.

“Two months before that, there was an accident in one of the labs. I wasn’t there at the time, but I was told he slipped on the edge of an unsecured tarp and was admitted with a concussion. He also suffered temporary blindness from the location of the blow and residual dizziness for the next few weeks.”

“I see it.” Her eyes flicked back and forth as she read through the summary. “I think you’re right, a fall like that would be enough to do the damage we’re seeing.” She blinked away the interface and looked back down at the circuit board. “Are you absolutely sure this is the only thing that’s broken?” Her skepticism was warranted. A literal pair of crossed wires seemed almost too simple an answer after everything that had happened.

After a moment of consideration, Hannibal nodded. “As far as I can tell, this is it.” He pulled the magnifying lamp down to look over the motherboard again, tracing over the connections again to see if there was anything he had missed. “I’ll get more eyes on the photographs, but at the moment I can’t see any other reason why Will would be experiencing these errors.”

Alana tilted to look through the magnifier, resting her elbow against Hannibal's shoulder for balance as she squinted down at the connections. "I need to check, but we should have those parts in stock. I can put the surgery on the board for next week, but how long the repair take?"

"It's most likely a matter of taking the leads out and rewiring it, though it might be easier to replace the entire module. Either way, it shouldn't take more than an hour." Alana hummed in approval and stepped away. Shifting back into position, Hannibal began to wrap the exposed wires in tape as a temporary fix.

"How do we ensure this problem doesn't happen again?"

"I could forgo the brackets and use glue instead, though everything would probably need to be reattached eventually."

"No. That could be a lot more difficult to clean up than a normal fixture if we ever have to do this again. Let's stick with the brackets, but this time go with plastic. It'll be more flexible than the metal, and should be able to withstand a similar impact."

Hannibal nodded and began to slip the components back into their holders, using his earlier photographs to check before he secured them into the case. He handed it over to Alana and watched from a distance as she slid it back into the chassis. She waited for a break in the conversation to interrupt. "Will, we're all done. We're going to sedate you now so we can stitch you back up and let you get some rest." Hannibal began to walk toward the door, but a hand hit his waist as he came within Will's sight line, and he stopped short.

"Wait!" Will couldn't actually turn his head, but his eyes flicked to the side to catch a glimpse of the person by the table. "What did you find?"

Hannibal took a step forward so Will could see him clearly and looked to Alana, wanting her approval before he spoke. "I'll explain everything for you later, however, we will be able to repair the implants completely, so you should have no more issues with the seizures and loss of control."

A broad smile spread over Will's face, and a second later he began to laugh, the quite sound echoing around the operating room. "Thank god!" It felt like he was finally able to breath again after holding himself tense for the past week. His muscles had started to shake like he was coming down from an adrenaline high, making the frame securing his head in place rattle. He could hear the heart monitor surging jumping and skipping as it kept up with the rapid change, and Will pressed the back of his hand to his lips to quiet his laughter.

Hannibal watched with a smile of his own beneath the surgical mask, touching his elbow to Will's shoulder in lieu of any other form of physical affection. He used his head to gesture to the door when Will looked at him. "I'll be there when you wake up."

"I'll see you then."

Chapter 8

Will drifted into consciousness in the middle of the night, slowly emerging from his drug induced slumber. He knew he had to be back in his room, but was still halfway burried in a sleepy haze that turned the world soft at the edges. The first things to actually register were sounds. The hospital quieted overnight, but was never truly silent, Will could still hear the fluorescent lights in the hallway buzzing, beeping from the heart monitor by his bed, soft conversations punctuated by yelling when there was an emergency. Underneath it all, he could hear steady breathing from someone else presumably sleeping nearby. It took a few more minutes to drag his eyelids open, and after a quick survey of the room his gaze landed on Hannibal's form, half slumped over in a chair by the bed, his hand intertwined with Will's own.

"'nibal?" He didn't quite have control over his lips, his entire head still numb enough that the name came out halfway unintelligible. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Hannibal?"

Hannibal twitched awake after a few seconds when Will called his name, blinking sleep out of his eyes. "It's good to see you awake."

"You're here."

"As promised." He squeezed Will's hand with a gentle smile, glancing over at the clock before shifting in an attempt to find a more comfortable position in the chair. He winced as his neck let out a pop and saw Will's eyebrows knit.

"You're gonna hurt your back like that."

Hannibal couldn't stop a quiet laugh at his concern. "I think I'll survive."

"No." Will shook his head and tugged at Hannibal's hand to drag him toward the bed. "C'mere." It took a minute for Hannibal to strip off his jacket and carefully thread his way beneath the multitude of wires and monitors attached to Will. The hospital bed was obviously only meant for one person, and Hannibal could feel the rail pressing against his back, but eventually he found a comfortable position, head resting on Will's shoulder with an arm wrapped around his waist.

"So I'm going to be ok?"

"If everything goes to plan, yes. Alana and I have your next surgery scheduled five days from now, and you won't have to be awake for that one."

"And after that, recovery." There was a strange lilt to Will's voice that made it sound like he was dreading leaving the hospital rather than looking forward to it as Hannibal would have expected.

"You already know I'll be there to help you, and you're welcome to stay with me as long as you need when you're released."

"Are you sure?"

Hannibal lifted his head to look up at Will and found his expression a strange cross between acceptance and fear. The painkillers made it difficult, bordering on impossible for Will to shift his head, and their current position meant that he couldn't actually see Hannibal. He appeared to have

settled instead for gazing at the ceiling. Hannibal tightened his arm around Will's waist in lieu of eye contact. "I see no reason why I wouldn't be."

The bed creaked quietly as Will lifted an arm to lay over Hannibal's. He was at a loss for words, surprised by the fact that Hannibal treated going so far out of his way to help him as simply a matter of course. He opened his mouth to speak but stopped when he heard the deep, even breathing that he recognized from the nights when he'd somehow managed to wake without disturbing Hannibal. "Thank you." He murmured before closing his own eyes and trying to sleep.

Will would later hear that his second surgery went off without a hitch. The lack of any major changes meant that he didn't need to be conscious for the procedure. He'd woken up a day later to Alana blurry smile as she prompted him through rudimentary tests before letting him go back to sleep. The next few days were basically the same as they kept him under observation to make sure he was in no immediate danger before allowing him to leave.

Most of his first week out of the hospital was spent unconscious or drifting in a haze of painkillers as he waited to fall asleep again. He sometimes woke to find Hannibal beside him on the bed, other times there would be prerecorded messages waiting to remind him to eat and take his meds. His eyesight was still too blurry for him to be able to read, and he'd have to be cleared before he was able to drive again.

A physical therapist had gotten him walking before he was released from the hospital, but it still hurt like hell, along with almost everything else in the world. He would often end up staggering to one of the chairs by the window and just sitting there for an hour before feeling able to move again.

It took another month before he could return to his own home, and he found himself struck by how oddly quiet the house was with him in it alone. Still, the solitude gave him time to think, going over older cases when his head didn't hurt. There was something that he was missing somewhere, he just hadn't had the chance to find it till now.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He returned to work in mid December, coming in for half days before returning home. While he hadn't exactly missed the academy, having something to focus on aside from his own thoughts as he caught up with everything he'd missed was something of a relief.

Will had taken to wearing a wool hat whenever he was out in public to hide the angry red line of skin that was still clearly visible on the back of his head. The cold weather provided ample excuse when he was outside, and glaring at anyone who looked too curious worked for interiors. His hair was growing back slowly, but the disinfectant soap he had to use meant that his entire scalp still smelled like the hospital.

He was adjusting the way it rested over his ears when someone knocked and he looked up to see a familiar face in the open doorway. "Hannibal, would you be willing to walk with me? I've been in here all morning and I need some fresh air."

"Of course."

They made their way past offices and classrooms until they emerged into the winter air and began to stroll along the balcony wrapped around the building in easy silence. It was shattered once they turned the corner away from the main thoroughfare.

"I know you're the one who attacked me." They kept walking in silence, Will gazing staunchly forward even though he could feel Hannibal examining him. "I had a lot of time to think while I was recovering, and this was the only way everything made sense.

"You told me that you asked to handle my case, when I transferred onto the Ripper investigation. Sensor data and occasionally scanning through the on board memory gives you some idea of how I handle the implants, but this way you got to monitor me first hand and I trusted you enough to tell you everything." The two of them came to a stop near one of the staircases, standing by the concrete railing that looked out onto the quad.

"What do you plan to do now?"

Will sighed, staring out at the empty campus. In the time it had taken him to recover, the semester had ended, and most of the students had either gone home or had better places to be than the academy. It meant that the blanket of snow covering the ground was only broken by a handful of footprints, rather than trampled away. "I'm not sure yet." He twisted his hands twisted into uneasy fists in his pockets, having spent more than one sleepless night debating with himself. "If I wanted to turn you in, how much control do you have?"

"Enough to stop you." Hannibal wouldn't kill him. The point where he could have done so had passed almost a year ago. He could likely incapacitate Will long enough to flee the country, but the effects would ultimately be temporary.

"You're not going to make any elaborate, drawn out threats?"

“No.”

Will stopped when they came to a set of stairs, looking down the length of them. The balcony above had kept them mostly free of ice save a few deposits where snow had built up near the far wall. It was safe, but the distance to the ground was still enough to make Will’s head spin as he gazed at the landing below. A gust of wind brushed along the walkway, pushing at his back as if urging him downward.

He turned carefully and leveled Hannibal with a expression that was halfway between anger and resignation. Without looking, he reached out to grasp the railing and he slid his heels to the edge of the first step, tilting backward so he hung at a angle over the stairs. “What would happen if I let go?” A sick part of his personality relished Hannibal’s alarm.

“I can’t say for sure.”

“You’ve literally seen my brain.” Will retorted. “Take a guess.”

“From this height? At the very least, you’ll be concussed, and would experience temporary blindness the same as before, though this time it might be permanent. Given how recent your surgery was, your skull would fracture, and the bone flap would come loose. I doubt it would be possible to repair.” It was disconcertingly easy for him to imagine thousands of hairline cracks spidering out around the bone, and he began to reach for Will’s arm, stopping at the warning glare he received. “As for the implants, the force would be enough to shatter the hard drive and possibly snap the case open. At that point, fragments would be driven directly into your brain.”

Will nodded, waiting for Hannibal to continue. A fall would be, for all intents and purposes, the end of his life and they both knew it. Will just wanted to hear Hannibal actually admit his own culpability in the matter. “Which will do enough damage to kill me, or leave me in a vegetative state. Either way, your experiment is ruined.” The warning hung between them for a minute before Will flexed his arm to bring himself halfway upright onto the top step. He balanced there for a moment before returning to his precarious lean over the stairs. It sent a wave of dizzy nausea rolling over him, and his knuckles turned white around the railing. He was painfully close to falling unintentionally.

“Will, please.” Will’s eyes didn’t quite focus when he looked up, and Hannibal used his disorientation to take a step forward, reaching out to wrap his hand around Will’s wrist. He tightened his grip when Will tried to shake him off, and saw the other man’s feet slip further on the edge. “Don’t.”

“I haven’t told anyone else or written down the evidence, if I die they’re probably not going to find you for a long time.” Will smirked mirthlessly. “So why not?”

“Because I don’t want to lose you.”

Will shook his head with a grimace. “What makes me any different from all the others?”

“I would think that was obvious by now.” Hannibal answered, holding out his free hand.

They regarded each other for a long time in silence, Hannibal calculating how difficult it would be to bodily pull the other man back from the edge of the stairs as Will looked again at the merits of his plan. It did have some poetic justice; Hannibal had just helped Alana save his life, and Will was

threatening to throw it all away. Hannibal's plan to keep him alive would fail, and his greatest success would become an abject failure.

The most logical course of action would be to run back into the building and explain everything to the first agent he could find. Will doubted Hannibal could escape from an FBI building on high alert. The resulting trial would inevitably end with the psychiatrist either in jail or a mental facility but for reasons he couldn't quite determine, that option had never crossed Will's mind.

He glanced back and forth between Hannibal and his own feet more times than he could count before he finally reached for Hannibal's hand and let himself be pulled back onto even footing.

Will stumbled away from the edge and reached out to brace himself against concrete wall at the edge of the balcony. It swan in and out of focus, and he doubled over as his stomach twisted. "I have pills in my coat, for the nausea." He was interrupted by a choking gasp, placing an hand over his eyes as he tried to keep his breakfast down. The pill bottle rattled as Hannibal retrieved it and clicked the cap open, waiting for Will's next instruction. "Give me two of them." Two capsules were pressed into his open palm, and Will swallowed them dry, resting his forehead atop wall til he was sure they wouldn't come back up. He groaned and turned to sink to the ground halfway curled in on himself, arms wrapped tightly around his torso.

He looked up when Hannibal stepped forward and offered his hand. "Would you like me to take you back to your office?"

Will fixed him with an expression of tired skepticism. "Do you really want to have this conversation there?"

"Fair point." Hannibal turned and sat beside Will, resting his back against the smooth concrete wall. He folded his hands carefully in his lap, and looked over at Will, waiting for him to speak.

"I… goddammit." Will sighed and let himself tilt sideways to rest his head against Hannibal's shoulder. A large part of him upset that he still found the contact comforting. "I wanted to be furious." Will tucked his face against Hannibal's neck while he waited for the building and his stomach to stop spinning. "But more than anything I was just confused. Betrayed." He'd felt physically sick the night he'd fit all the puzzle pieces together, curling in on himself beneath the sheets in the vain hope that it was just another one of his nightmares. Things that made sense to his half conscious mind often revealed themselves to be completely nonsensical when he looked at them again. Waking up in the morning to find that everything pointed the same way when he looked at it with fresh eyes had only been worse. "I thought I meant more to you than just as a test subject, that we actually had … something."

"You mean much more to me than any of the others." He admitted, bringing a hand up to curl at the base of Will's neck. "I did initially accept your case as a way to follow your progress, and to push you in the wrong direction if you came too close. But I developed feelings for you far beyond what I could have expected." He took a breath and rested his cheek against Will's head. The position was familiar for both of them, but under the circumstances it felt alien, forced, like they had been asked to pose for a photo. "I care deeply about you."

It was fairly obvious what he was leaving unsaid, and they sat together in silence for a long while before Will spoke. "If you had known me before, would you still have attacked me?"

"No." Hannibal placed a hand on Will's jaw and guided him upright so the two were eye to eye, a plaintive expression stretched across his features. "I made a mistake."

Will searched his face, looking for any sign that he was lying. He brought a hand up to grasp Hannibal's wrist, surprised when he found his pulse elevated just above its normal steady rhythm. "I want to believe you."

"It's your choice to make."

Or did he really? There was an odd feel of inevitability to their conversation. It was a simple matter of reaching a predetermined conclusion. Will had tried to figure out where ha had gone wrong, but he couldn't imagine any of his decisions changing. Including the one he was about to make.

He threaded his fingers through Hannibal's hair and yanked him into a bruising kiss. Teeth caught on Will's lower lip and he used Hannibal's surprised gasp to press closer so he was pinned firmly against the wall. Will broke away when he needed air, drawing in gigantic lungfuls as he pressed his forehead to Hannibal's. "Take me home."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, once again thank you to Jainas and my Betas.
I would love to hear any comments you all have about the story. This is the longest thing I've written so far and I'm proud of it.
Thanks again,
ivnwrites

Works inspired by this one

[Fanart] The Human Machine by Jainas

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!